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### The Absurdity of Life

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## THE ABSURDITY OF LIFE

Steven Luper, Trinity University

In "The Absurd"<sup>1</sup> Nagel claims that self-conscious human beings are necessarily absurd, so that to escape absurdity while remaining human we would have to cease being self-conscious. Fifteen years later, in *The View From Nowhere*,<sup>2</sup> he defends the same thesis, supplementing some of his old arguments with a battery of new ones. I want to suggest that Nagel has misdiagnosed, and exaggerated the inescapability of, our absurdity. He does so partly because the grounds on which he bases his conclusion are spurious, and partly because he does not acknowledge the extent to which we can eliminate absurdity by suitably redesigning our plans and modes of justification. Nonetheless, I do not mean to imply that we can easily eliminate absurdity from our lives. Life is not *necessarily* absurd, but unfortunately, in a world like ours, there are limits to what we can and should do to reduce the absurd elements of our affairs.

### The View of the Nowhere Man

"In ordinary life a situation is absurd," Nagel says, "when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality: someone gives a complicated speech in support of a motion that has already been passed. . . ; as you are being knighted, your pants fall down."<sup>3</sup> In this passage from "The Absurd" Nagel claims that absurdity is a particularly striking sort of incongruity, and the conception of absurdity he discusses in his book is the same.

What sort of discrepancy does Nagel have in mind in calling life absurd? It involves a discrepancy between two points of view that human beings maintain though with difficulty. In both of his essays Nagel runs through several respects in which something he variously calls the "outer perspective" or "objective view" or "external standpoint" or "objective self" clashes with something he variously calls the "inner

perspective" or "subjective view" or "internal standpoint" or "subjective self". In these clashes, the subjective view from our twinkling left eye tempts us to think the world a warm, lush place where life is inviting while the objective view from our soulless, lidless right eye is that of a cold, barren wasteland with dubious value. Absurdity results from the cognitive dissonance of seeing through both eyes at once, and while shutting our left eye would lessen the dissonance, there is little temptation for us to blink since then our world would appear to be *nothing but* a frigid vacuum. Nor ought we to take a sharp stick to our lidless right eye, according to Nagel; such deliberate self-blinding is simply self-deception.

In both his essay and his book, Nagel says that some of our difficulty in combining the inner and outer perspectives is traceable to a heavy fog of confusing mistakes. I take it that he means to make several such mistakes in the following passage from *The View from Nowhere*: "to see myself objectively as a small, contingent, and exceedingly temporary organic bubble in the universal soup produces an attitude approaching indifference."<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to take ourselves seriously (as we do on the "subjective view," the perspective generated by our projects, attachments and concerns) if we think of ourselves as small bubbles that burst almost as soon as we are formed (as we might on the "objective view"). Yet our size and longevity cannot really make us absurd. For if we thought of ourselves as small absurd creatures, wouldn't a great increase in our size simply lead us to think of ourselves as gigantic absurd creatures? Unfortunately, other clashes of the inner and outer views do not involve mistakes, and whereas we get accounts of the tension in both of Nagel's works, in his book Nagel considerably alters his early position on how the clashes generate absurdity.

In both works the absurdity Nagel has in mind is an incongruity between what we pretend our lives to be and what they are. On the early view the problem is a kind of skepticism. "We have always available a point of view," Nagel says, "from which the seriousness [with which we live life] appears gratuitous."<sup>5</sup> So it is always possible to

regard "everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt."<sup>6</sup> He adds that this point of view from which seriousness appears gratuitous "is not supposed to give us an understanding of what is *really* important, so that we see by contrast that our lives are insignificant."<sup>7</sup> We are not to understand that in reality nothing is significant; instead, the idea appears to be that our encounter with the view *sub specie aeternitatis* enables us to see that we lack any *reason* to think that anything matters. *Sub specie aeternitatis* we can see that our system of justification is unjustifiable and hence anything we were inclined to take seriously through relying on it is dubious. Yet we cannot help but take life seriously; "these two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd."<sup>8</sup> Even though *sub specie aeternitatis* we can see that we have no reasons to do things or to regard our affairs as important, we cannot escape the point of view which says our pursuits are well worth the effort.

As bad as our situation is as portrayed in Nagel's early essay, it is much worse as described in his book. The skeptical doubts that so exercised Nagel when he wrote his essay leave open the possibility that life really is worthwhile. Later Nagel remains a skeptic of sorts<sup>9</sup> yet he claims that we have worse problems than the mere fact that we have no reason to consider life worthwhile. Now when we take the external standpoint we brush against nihilism: viewed objectively our lives are virtually *worthless*. "The pursuit of objectivity with respect to value runs the risk of leaving value behind altogether. . . .If we continue along the path that leads from personal inclination to objective values and ethics, we may fall into nihilism. The problem is to know where and how to stop. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

A detailed examination of Nagel's earlier and later arguments is in order. The issues we need to resolve are these: (1) Can Nagel show that objectively our lives are nearly valueless (or at least that their objective value is not nearly as great as their subjective value), as he tries to do in his book? (2) If he could, would it follow that our lives were absurd? (3) If Nagel cannot show that objectively our lives have little value,

can he at least do what he attempts in his essay, namely show that we have no *reason* to take ourselves seriously? (4) And finally, if he could deliver on his skeptical thesis, would it follow that our lives were absurd?

### Absurdity and the Threat of Nihilism

Nagel warns us that the objective view drags us toward nihilism while the subjective view drags us away, leaving us stretched absurdly between the two. But in fact Nagel says almost nothing about *why* are pulled toward nihilism. He is more concerned to say that the threat of nihilism is not real. Already in chapter 8 he had dismissed the possibility that there might be no such thing as objective values with the dogmatic comment that "the acceptance of some objective values is unavoidable--not because the alternative is inconsistent but because it is not *credible*. [There is something the matter with] someone who. . .prefers the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of his finger. . . , and anyone. . .would regard his preference as objectively wrong."<sup>11</sup> And in 11 he sums matters up as follows:

An impersonal perspective doesn't necessarily lead to nihilism. It may fail to discover *independent* reasons to care about what subjectively concerns us, but much that is of value and significance in the world can be understood directly only from within the perspective of a particular form of life, and this can be recognized from an external standpoint. The fact that the point of something can't be understood from the objective standpoint alone doesn't mean it must be regarded objectively as pointless. . . .<sup>12</sup>

Even from the objective standpoint we can see that we have reason to value our subjective concerns, Nagel says. That some things matter and have a point is an objective fact, as is the fact that they matter for subjective reasons.

If it is not nihilism that threatens us with absurdity, what does? Well, perhaps his real concern is that *individuals* might not have objective importance, which is a matter

that Nagel does not clearly distinguish from the thought that objective values might not exist at all. "Finding *my* life objectively *insignificant*," he says, "I am nevertheless unable to extricate myself from an unqualified commitment to it--to my aspirations and ambitions, my wishes for fulfillment, recognition, understanding, and so forth. The sense of the absurd is the result of this juxtaposition."<sup>13</sup>

At this juncture one might be tempted to conclude that the problem of absurdity will arise only for those who speed down the road of objectivity so fast that the (objective) importance of their subjective concerns blurs into invisibility. Nagel will concede no such thing, however. We just saw him acknowledge that the external view allows us to attribute importance to some things in virtue of their having a subjective value, but he appears to think the external view forces us to assign them very *little* importance. The value I assign my life "is quite out of proportion to the importance I can reasonably accord it from outside. From there I can accord it no more importance than it merits in a global view which includes all possible forms of life and their value on an equal footing."<sup>14</sup>

Here Nagel's argument teeters on the threshold of incomprehensibility. Having said that the objective standpoint acknowledges that my life is of value, does he really mean to add that objectively speaking my life is of damn little importance since it has the same significance as that of any living thing and the same, moreover, as any possible things, so that it is no better than the life of the possible angry man standing in the doorway? Is it his idea that objectively I ought to pursue with equal enthusiasm the interests of every living thing and even of merely possible living things (past, present and future)? Hasn't Nagel ignored his own admonishment that in rolling down the objective road we be careful to discover "how and where to stop"? It looks that way, since it is patently absurd to say that the concerns of individual people are no more important than those of individual possible people, individual plants and animals, and individual possible plants and animals. But charity demands that we at least temper his demand that all possible

forms of life be placed on an equal footing. Let us instead attribute to Nagel the view that objectivity is a matter of placing all human beings on an equal footing.

On this interpretation, Nagel assumes that the impersonal stance is roughly one by which we assign equal importance to every person's ends,<sup>15</sup> and adjust our own preferences and concern for the preferences of others accordingly, presumably by fitting everyone's ends together into a collective project through which everyone's ends are advanced in fair measure. The resulting preferences then determine the objective value of things. There is a problem with this interpretation, however. For it cannot explain why Nagel believes that individual lives appear objectively trivial unless we also attribute to Nagel the assumption that to consider everyone's interests equally important we must attribute little importance to each person's interests.<sup>16</sup> Together with the claim that each of us is equally important, this assumption would explain why it is hard to take ourselves seriously, yet the assumption is gratuitous. For it is always possible to take the attitude that everyone is extremely important even if none is more important than others. That everyone's concerns are on a par so far as value is concerned is true not just when they are equally unimportant but also when they are equally important. A sense of our own unimportance need not threaten us at all.

Apparently it is not just the equal status of people that leads Nagel to conclude that each person's life is objectively trivial. So what else is involved? I would speculate that Nagel reaches his conclusion because he assumes that the objective value of people's ends is roughly equal to (certainly no greater than) how strongly we (anyone) would be motivated by those ends once we assign equal importance to everyone's ends and construct a collective project accordingly. Given this tie between motivation and value, no individual's concerns are more important than they 'feel' to anyone who takes up the collective project. We can care less and less about each individual involved in a collective project as more and more individuals are involved, so that when we have to

consider all human beings (much less all possible living things!) as involved in a collective project, no individual's aims or life can be taken very seriously.

In spite of the fact that the connection between motivation and value explains his fear that individuals are objectively unimportant, I hesitate to say that Nagel makes the connection. For one thing, it is not clear *why* Nagel does it. It is related to his moral internalist claim that something can be a reason to value something only if it would motivate us when we contemplate it, but it is a far stronger form of internalism than he expresses elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> Worse yet, bizarre consequences follow from the claim that the importance of people and their projects is determined by how powerfully those projects motivate someone who is attempting to work those people and projects into a collective scheme. For an example, consider the way Nagel criticizes the following argument: "If for each person his own death is awful, then every death should be regarded objectively as awful."<sup>18</sup> In response, Nagel complains that

we cannot regard all those deaths with the interest with which their subjects regard them: sheer emotional overload prevents it, as anyone who has tried to summon a feeling adequate to an enormous massacre knows. The objective standpoint simply cannot accommodate at its full subjective value the fact that everyone, oneself included, inevitably dies.<sup>19</sup>

What Nagel is saying here is that objectively death is not nearly as awful as we normally think since human beings lack the mental capacity to be as horrified at everyone's death as each individual is horrified at his or her own death!

Suppose that the awfulness of five deaths is the maximum people can regard with the interest with which their subjects regard them. Does it follow that objectively speaking six deaths is no worse than five? Five *billion* no worse than five? Is there no reason objectively speaking to prefer saving billions of lives to saving few given how limited people are in their capacity to take on the interests of others? (And if not, then why on earth does Nagel say that objectively we can see that everyone's interests must be



pursued equally?) I cannot help but think that Nagel ought to drop his strong internalist view that the objective importance of individuals and their projects is limited by the extent to which human beings would find themselves motivated by them after placing them on a par with others and the projects of others. It would be better for Nagel to say (in the spirit of his moral realism) that certain aspects of the truth about objective value are relatively inaccessible to people because of their limited emotional capacities, and that only a being who could completely appreciate the concerns of everyone in their full subjective vividness would be able to know the truth about what is of value.

If we dropped Nagel's strong internalist claim, there would no longer be any motivation for his view that our lives are objectively trivial.<sup>20</sup> Nothing would stand in the way of acknowledging what seems obvious to us anyway, namely that everybody's life is extremely important, even if none of us can fully identify with everyone else's concerns. However, it is important to notice that we would not yet have defeated Nagel's argument for the absurdity of life. To argue that life is absurd, Nagel *does not need* to insist that our lives are objectively mediocre. Instead he could do so on the basis of a more plausible claim that he also defends, namely, that subjectively we value ourselves, our projects, and those of our friends and families far more than we do others and their projects, while we cannot do so objectively. For objectively we must empathize with, and pursue the interests of, every person (indeed, every creature) alike. Hence there is a substantial enough discrepancy between our value objectively and our value subjectively for us to speak of absurdity.

But why should we think that a perspective constructed after giving equal consideration to everyone's ends will assign an importance to our own lives that is so out of wack with their great subjective importance that we strike ourselves as absurd? Both the utilitarian and the Kantian approach can be seen as attempts to give equal consideration to everybody's ends, and perhaps the utilitarian attempt to maximize the total good really does force us to neglect our individual concerns so thoroughly that we

just cannot reconcile the importance our lives have to us with the idea that we are to do everything possible to maximize the total good. (This is not obvious, since one might argue, as Mill did, that the best way to maximize the total is to let each person pursue his or her individual good.) But on a broadly Kantian approach it is certainly possible to justify giving priority to ourselves and to our loved ones in many sorts of circumstance, enough that the gulf between our subjective and objective assessments of our projects need not be so wide that we cannot bring the two into line by trimming down our subjective assessment.<sup>21</sup> For we would be willing to universalize the practice of individuals' sometimes giving priority to themselves and to those close to them. While it is the Kantian approach to decide on our moral obligations using an impartial methodology, it does not follow that we must always *act* impartially, for some of the principles selected by an impartial methodology will lead us to be partial.<sup>22</sup> For example, impartial considerations would lead us to the view that people must be allowed to attribute less importance to pursuing the ends of others than to pursuing the relationships and projects that make their lives at least minimally worth living. A similar result can be reached if we start with the attitude that every person's interests count equally. This attitude will lead us to act from rules selected through a process that treats everyone equally, but those rules need not require that we pursue everyone's interests alike in every situation.

Which brings us to a further problem with Nagel's attempt to demonstrate our absurdity: why agree with him that the equal objective importance of our ends and lives entails our pursuing everyone's ends alike? Why not say that this equal objective importance requires only that we regard interfering with anyone's pursuit as equally bad as their interfering with ours? On this view we can consider people equals without adopting and pursuing their ends. It is enough that we show them no more and no less courtesy than we expect them to show us. When my interests conflict with yours, we

treat each other as equals by seeking out a fair compromise, one by which we interfere with each other's pursuits as little as possible.

On this interpretation of the objective stance, bringing our subjective valuation of things into line with our objective valuation need involve no special difficulty. We would say that the objective value of our pursuits is exactly what we subjectively think it is unless those pursuits interfere unfairly with those of others, in which case only a transformed version of them--one by which we deal fairly with others--has objective value. The altered version ought then become the one to which we become subjectively attached.

Hence even if Nagel's assumption that pursuing everyone's ends alike really did lead to an assessment of our lives that was far out of wack with our subjective assessments, Nagel still could not conclude that our lives are absurd. For his assumption is easily disputed. The upshot is that Nagel's case for absurdity on the basis of our objective triviality depends on extremely controversial issues concerning the specifics of moral theory. At best, such grounds would allow Nagel to defend a weak version of his thesis on absurdity. It is obvious that many people are to *no* degree tempted to pursue the interests of everyone alike; libertarians and others say that this pursuit is not obligatory. So if being drawn to this pursuit is what makes life absurd, then clearly many people avoid absurdity. Nagel cannot say that absurdity is a problem for all human beings. At most, it is a problem for those who share Nagel's conception of moral objectivity. Question: has Nagel shown that all moral human beings face absurdity, or has he provided a *reductio ad absurdum* argument against his conception of moral objectivity?

### Value Skepticism

Since Nagel has not shown that our lives are objectively trivial or relatively trivial compared to their subjective importance, he cannot appeal to these considerations to

show that our lives are absurd. However, he could still base his thesis on his weaker, earlier claim that we have no grounds for thinking our lives worthwhile. So let us examine the way Nagel defends skepticism in his essay "The Absurd."

There his position is that our very system for deciding what is and is not worthwhile admits of no possible justification. If we find a layer of assumptions that can be used to defend our system, that just shows that we are not yet surveying the *whole* system. Once we do, it is a forgone conclusion that we will be unable to defend our system. And our inability to defend our system of reason-giving shows that we have no reason to consider anything--our lives included--as worth pursuing.

It is difficult to understand this reasoning since it sounds just like the specious regress argument that Nagel considers and rejects early in his essay. Nagel certainly appears to be arguing as follows: we may well value some things on the basis of more fundamental standards, but we must justify those deep standards themselves before we can use them to justify other things. Yet we cannot. We are simply built with them, and "what seems to us important or serious or valuable would not seem so if we were differently constituted."<sup>23</sup> Why does Nagel think that unless we have reasons for accepting our standards then everything we do and believe is dubitable--unless he also thinks that "nothing can justify unless it is justified in terms of something outside itself, which is also justified"?

Perhaps what worries Nagel is our inability to give a dialectically persuasive defense of our own scheme of justification and attendant values over schemes other than our own, not the fact that our own system floats in the air in the sense that it is unsupported by anything outside itself. We might have had a radically different value scheme from the point of view of which our own would be completely alien; perhaps this thought has made Nagel think that our scheme is incapable of justifying any value judgments. It is hard to say, since Nagel never told us why he rejects the old regress argument, or why the new argument--the argument from alternatives, as we might call it--

avoids the problems with the old (assuming it *is* the argument from alternatives that Nagel has in mind).

But that is no surprise since, I suggest, the argument from alternatives is no more and no less successful than the regress argument. Both arguments demonstrate that there is a sense in which our scheme of justification is ultimately arbitrary; namely, we run out of reasons for judging as we do before we run out of possible alternative ways of judging. I cannot give a full account here, but I deny that this arbitrariness is any reason to suppose that our scheme of justification is incapable of supporting judgments<sup>24</sup>. We need not show that it is better to enjoy the taste of blackberry pie than to enjoy the taste of rhubarb and mud pie before that enjoyment constitutes *prima facie* grounds for eating blackberry pie.

That Nagel was in some sense concerned with the ultimate arbitrariness of our judgments is suggested by the following passage: "we see ourselves from outside, and all the contingency and specificity of our aims and pursuits become clear. Yet when we take this view and recognize what we do as arbitrary, it does not disengage us from life, and there lies our absurdity. . . ." <sup>25</sup> If Nagel is suggesting here that what we do is arbitrary in the sense that we run out of reasons for judging as we do before we run out of alternatives, he is correct. My objection, as I just explained, is to Nagel's view that this arbitrariness undermines the force of our judgments.

Arbitrariness is not the only concern mentioned in this passage. Nagel also worries about the "contingency and specificity" of our aims. But what have the "contingency and specificity of our aims" to do with absurdity? Is the idea supposed to be that our lives would lack absurdity only if our aims were necessary and general? This claim is so preposterous that I cannot believe Nagel means it. Consider the predicament of Sisyphus, everyone's favorite example of absurdity. Instead of imagining him ordered by the gods to shoulder one particular rock up one particular hill, only to see it fall before he gets it to the top, let us imagine him laboring to roll rocks in general up hills in

general, and let us imagine his free will eliminated, at least to the extent that try as he might he cannot escape the urge to roll rocks up hills. Let us even suppose, if we can, that Sisyphus necessarily will spend eternity shoving boulders. Do these additions to the myth make him *less* absurd? Clearly not, since what he is doing is the very picture of futility, and he has no hope of escape.

### Absurdity, Value Skepticism and Objective Triviality

The fact is that Nagel does not give a convincing motivation for his value skepticism, his claim that we have no (noncircular) reason to choose one value scheme rather than another or none, or for attributing value to one action rather than another or none. But let us stop worrying about the skeptical argument Nagel might have given had he given one. Instead, let us simply give Nagel his value skepticism and ask whether he gets absurdity in the bargain. In answering, however, let us not limit ourselves to conclusions that presuppose Nagel's own conception of absurdity. Let us re-examine that notion, and see whether it is absurd to take ourselves seriously on other characterizations of absurdity.

On Nagel's view absurdity amounts to a kind of incongruity between pretension and reality: "the sense that life as a whole is absurd arises when we perceive, perhaps dimly, an inflated pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from the continuation of human life and which makes its absurdity inescapable, short of escape from life itself."<sup>26</sup> Let us ignore the fact that not just any disappointed expectation--not even all of the ones we cannot abandon--would make life (or a situation within life) absurd. The questions to consider are these: Need any such discrepancy occur in the lives of people whose activities *have* no objective value? And must the discrepancy occur in the lives of value skeptics?

From one point of view a negative answer to the second question is clearly indicated. So long as people do not *aspire* to value things only under the impetus of a justification for valuing, they can be value skeptics without discrepancy. People need

have no illusion about the fact that their lives consist in pursuing ends which have no further grounds. No such illusion is *inseparable* from life, although it is true that prior to their encounter with an absurdist people *might* well believe that nothing matters unless justified in term of something else that matters, and they might find it difficult to give up that belief. No matter: it is entirely within the bounds of normal human capacity, and so absurdity of the sort Nagel describes can be eliminated.

Leaving matters here, however, is not fully satisfactory given the rather narrow conception of absurdity with which Nagel works. Pointless and senseless activities need not involve the discrepancy between aspiration and reality to which Nagel refers. A life of random, unreflective and hence pointless maneuvers need not pretend to be anything other than what it is. Yet it would still be senseless and thus absurd.<sup>27</sup> For this reason the thoughts of people whose short-term memories extend no further back than a few minutes are so poignant. They are unable to put their lives into any kind of sensible order, for about the time they reach the bewildering realization that they do not know what is going on, they must begin all over again.<sup>28</sup>

Since Nagel's idea of absurdity is overly restrictive, let us explicate the notion in some detail, and then reassess the statuses of value skeptics. Not surprisingly, my claims will be that more than one thing is meant by 'absurd', that some kinds of absurdity are more serious than others, but that we are not unavoidably prone to any sorts of absurdity I identify.

The meanings of the adjective 'absurd' include *ridiculous*, *incongruous*, and *meaningless*. The first two of these three terms are relatively clear, while the last one is very much in need of further clarification. Things may be meaningless in three senses: they might be senseless, pointless, or futile. *Senseless* means unintelligible, not fitting into an intelligible order, as happens, for example, when our activities do not fit into some purposeful pattern. Something is *futile* when it *has* a purpose yet fails to achieve it, as when we intend our swimming against what turns out to be an overwhelming current

to get us upstream. Something is *pointless*, on the other hand, when it has no purpose at all.

Given the three meanings of ‘meaningless,’ we have identified five basic uses of the term ‘absurd.’ It might be used to indicate the ridiculous or the incongruous, which is a pair of closely related uses. Or it might indicate senselessness, futility, or pointlessness. One thing that ‘absurd’ does *not* mean, I think, is *unworthwhile* or *valueless*. It is natural to think that ‘absurd’ does mean ‘valueless’ since there is a close link between ‘meaningless’ and ‘valueless.’ But I suspect that this link consists in the fact that activities may be meaningless and hence absurd when acting in those ways is in every sense valueless and unworthwhile. For doing completely valueless and unworthwhile things is pointless, futile, ridiculous or all three at once.

Of course, I do not mean to say that no one can use ‘absurd’ to mean ‘valueless.’ But given the wide range of things that we might have in mind in calling life absurd, we should be wary of thinking that life's complete valuelessness follows directly from life's absurdity, or that a life that is not absurd is necessarily fully worthwhile. Just how serious a matter it would be to discover that life is absurd depends on the *sense* in which life has turned out to be absurd and on the number of elements of life concerned. While it is odd that some people spike their hair and spray it purple, such incongruities are not serious. But concluding that many aspects of our lives are humorously incongruous is one thing, while concluding that nothing is worth doing, or that all is futile, is quite another. A life which consists in activities in no sense worth doing is not worth having; persisting in such a life would be absurd in a tragic way.

To return, then, to our question: as value skeptics, would we be doomed to absurdity if we persisted in valuing things? I do not see why. If we had overwhelming *reason* to think nothing mattered, either in the sense that there is no such thing as value (nihilism) or in the sense that our lives lack the positive value other things have, it *would* be absurd (ridiculous, pointless, and senseless) to take things seriously. It would mean



straining toward goals we knew were not worth achieving. However, skeptics are in no position to defend a stance about what has value. They insist that we have no reason to think anything matters, yet equally we do not have reason to believe that *nothing* matters, they must admit. We have no reason to value anything, they would say, but they must add that we have no reason *not* to value anything.

So skepticism *does not suggest that we stop valuing things*. We will think otherwise only if we supplement the skeptic's claim that we have no ultimate justification for valuing with the additional claim that we should never value things if we lack positive justification for doing so. But why should we or the skeptic do that?<sup>29</sup> Why not continue to value things without pretending that our grounds for doing so never run out? In particular, why must doing so be *absurd*? Where is the absurdity in finding ourselves with certain strong desires that we take for granted without defense and building a life around fulfilling them? Indeed, why not go beyond the desires we already have? I see nothing absurd about *creating* values, simply *deciding* (without initial grounds) to value various things, then building a life in conformity with those values.

But mustn't a life built around undefended goals be senseless, pointless or futile? I do not see that such goals are especially prone to these forms of absurdity. Futility will not be a problem so long as we really can reach our goals. Nor will senselessness and pointlessness be a problem on the assumption that sense can be created through the very structuring of a life around undefended goals, so that the activities subservient to the goals make sense and have a point through having those goals as their point, and the latter make sense by being the point of the former. That our final goals *are* points does not entail that they *have* a point, but why not take their point to *be* their serving as final ends around which we organize our lives? Again, if our formula for a worthwhile life or a sensible life is one consisting in a series of distinct activities each of which is made sensible or worthwhile by a sensible or worthwhile activity later in the series, then a

worthwhile or sensible life is impossible for us. We should reject that formula, however, not life.

But can we really take undefended goals *seriously*? And if not, won't there be a discrepancy between our attitudes to our final, undefended goals and the seriousness with which we devote ourselves to the lives we build around satisfying those goals? Here it is important to repeat the Humean observation that our passions do not need the endorsement of reason to be strong. But Hume's observation is not sufficient, since many people will not discover already existing in their psyches passions varied and complex enough to sustain them in taking a strong interest in life.

Still, the *fact* that we have assigned a set of goals the role of being that around which our lives are to be built will itself endow those goals with a certain solemnity. While this is true, however, it does not address an important additional worry: if there is a *range* of ways to lead my life, and initially I regard the choice among them as totally arbitrary, then any time I encounter trouble in pursuing one I need not deplore my fate since I may as well shift to another that is easier to achieve; yet taking such a shift attitude toward my life-directing goals is inconsistent with taking them seriously.

Here the reply must be that once we construct our lives around some central endeavors, and completely internalize the valuations dictated thereby, we *cannot* maintain the attitude that an entirely different life would do just as well, so that in the face of adversity we can just adopt new values according to which the adversity looks like success. My point is not just the psychological (and anti-Sartrean) observation that it is not possible to simply abandon a set of values we have spent years internalizing. I am also making a claim about what commitment entails. It makes no sense to say that I have committed myself to curing cancer (for example) if I maintain an attitude of indifference between: (1) attaining my goal, or (2) failing, but accomplishing some *other* goal. In committing ourselves to living our lives one way, we give up the initial flexibility we had before we adopted that commitment. We can still see that we might have committed

ourselves to very different values, but that certainly does not support the contention that we should now be indifferent about whether we retain the values we did adopt. Only if we were nihilists, and never really adopted any values at all would we retain the flexibility necessary to not mind our fate come what may. But then we also would be so plastic that we could not *welcome* any fate that comes our way.<sup>30</sup>

### The Persistence of Absurdity

I conclude that Nagel has not shown that human lives are absurd, much less that they are virtually unalterably so. In this last section I shall assume that we have a rough idea about what a worthwhile life would entail, and that a worthwhile life is possible, so that by assumption living need not be absurd because living is something whose value is indiscernible or nonexistent. I shall also assume that futility, pointlessness, and senselessness can be minimized by suitably designing our projects. In designing our projects, we would ensure that none of them is impossible to complete; in this way we would avoid undertaking futile activities. We would also see to it that each of our projects fits into a coherent scheme, so that each has as its point some other project of ours, or the fact that it is the point for some other project, and so that the whole is a life that makes sense. These assumptions capture obvious ways that the absurdity of life can be minimized, and for the most part we ought to take advantage of those ways. Nonetheless, I want to underline how difficult it is to eliminate absurdity completely.

The problem is that no matter how thoroughly we structure our activities into coherent, manageable wholes, we cannot render our projects invulnerable to fate. Everything we value is vulnerable; it takes luck to achieve even a minimally worthwhile life, and even the luckiest will probably not accomplish everything they deeply care about, since death brings all of our projects to a brutal halt. So the danger that many of our efforts in life will be futile is palpable.

I do not mean to say that we can do nothing about the futility and senselessness in our lives. If we cannot find the means to overcome all obstacles to our goals, we might try eliminating goals for which there are obstacles we cannot overcome. In effect, the idea is to free ourselves from the threat that our aspirations are in vain by choosing ones that are invulnerable to fate. There is a long tradition of attempting just that; the strategy is suggested in Taoist and Buddhist writings, as well as in the works of such hedonists as Epicurus and such stoics as Epictetus. Upon noting the vulnerability of the people and things to which we usually become attached, we could respond by altering our values, by replacing our tendency to care spontaneously and unguardedly with a policy of caring only about matters over which we have complete control and about goals we are sure to meet regardless of what we do. The strategy is to radically adjust our values and desires in an attempt to sustain the view that only what is completely invulnerable, or vulnerable only to us, is *truly* worthwhile.

The main problem with this strategy is that the attempt to care only about matters over which we have complete control would leave us very little to care about, since so little is completely in our control. Hence to care only about those things that are completely in our control would be to alienate ourselves from everything capable of making life worthwhile. It would be to make ourselves impervious to futility by making ourselves impervious to a good life. So for adherents of the ancient strategy, a worthwhile life would be impossible. Seemingly benign, the ancient strategy has turned out to be something else: nihilistic. Perhaps more to the point: on the assumption that it is absurd to cling to something that is not worthwhile, the ancient strategy would win us invulnerability to futility only at the price of emptying our lives so thoroughly that enduring them would be absurd.

It seems that we are in a bind. We can and should reduce the amount of futile suffering we face by eliminating goals that are doomed.<sup>26</sup> But if we extend this strategy too far--if we go on to eliminate all of our vulnerable goals--we would remove all the

worthwhile elements in our lives, leaving a hollow shell of a life to which it would be absurd to cling. Given the world we live in, any worthwhile life is likely to involve absurdity.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>*Journal of Philosophy* 63 (1971) 716-727; reprinted in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981). Page references are to the reprinted version.

<sup>2</sup>(New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup>"The Absurd," op. cit., p. 153.

<sup>4</sup>*The View From Nowhere*, op. cit., p. 210.

<sup>5</sup>"The Absurd," op. cit., p. 153.

<sup>6</sup>"The Absurd," p. 153.

<sup>7</sup>"The Absurd," p. 157.

<sup>8</sup>"The Absurd," p. 153.

<sup>9</sup>Later Nagel thinks that skepticism is less threatening than he thought it was earlier:

I believe that skepticism is revealing and not refutable, but that it does not vitiate the pursuit of objectivity. It is worth trying to bring one's beliefs, one's actions,

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and one's values more under the influence of an impersonal standpoint even without the assurance that this could not be revealed from a still more external standpoint as an illusion. (p. 7)

It is reasonable to think that we *have* reasons to believe, value, and do things, he claims here, even though it is conceivable that we could discover that this reasonable thought is a mere illusion. Hence he is willing to say things that are inconsistent with his earlier skeptical stance. On pages 143ff, for example, we are treated to a round of burden-of-proof toss, and on page 155 we get some foot stomping: "The acceptance of some objective values is unavoidable--not because the alternative is inconsistent but because it is not *credible*."

<sup>10</sup>*The View from Nowhere*, p. 209.

<sup>11</sup>*The View from Nowhere*, p. 155.

<sup>12</sup>*The View from Nowhere*, p. 219, cf. p. 147

<sup>13</sup>*The View from Nowhere*, op. cit., p. 218 (my italics).

<sup>14</sup>*The View from Nowhere*, p. 220.

<sup>15</sup>One reason why this characterization is rough is that according to Nagel we will not care about some of the ends of others once we take up the objective stance. Having read Scanlon's "Preference and Urgency," *Journal of Philosophy*, 1975, Nagel devotes much of Chapter IX to a struggle to accommodate the fact that we ought not assign objective value to others' getting everything they want: "if I badly want to climb to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro, not everyone has a reason to want me to succeed." (p. 167) I find Nagel's discussion quite obscure, and I cannot see why he does not simply say that while every end of each person has objective value, nonetheless in many cases that value is vanishingly small, so that none of us should concern ourselves about ambitious mountain climbers unless (*per impossible*) we have done everything we can to (help people) achieve all of the many ends that are far more important.

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<sup>16</sup>True, Nagel says (on p. 171) that "from the objective standpoint, the fundamental thing leading to the recognition of agent-neutral reasons is a sense that no one is more important than anyone else. The question then is whether we are all equally unimportant or all equally important, and the answer, I think, is somewhere in between." But clearly Nagel must think that objectively we are more nearly unimportant than important, or else he would not have said that "human life even at its subjective best" is threatened with "objective meaninglessness" (p. 215), nor that we find our lives "objectively insignificant." (p. 218)

<sup>17</sup>Nagel defends internalism in *The Possibility of Altruism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970). But it shows up in *The View from Nowhere*; for example, see p. 201, where he says that the objective view "must engage the will."

<sup>18</sup>*The View from Nowhere*, p. 229.

Nagel makes several points about death in the final section of his book that he did not make in his essay "Death" (*Mortal Questions* [Cambridge: University Press, 1979]) or in his essay "The Absurd" (op. cit.). I made several of the same points independently in "Annihilation," *Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (1987) 233-253.

<sup>19</sup>*The View from Nowhere*, p. 230.

<sup>20</sup>One advantage of avoiding near-nihilism would be that it would make it easier for Nagel to explain why objective considerations should win out over subjective ones when the two conflict; after all, if, objectively, individuals are not very important, why should we worry about how they are affected by projects to which we ascribe high subjective importance?

<sup>21</sup>In an earlier chapter Nagel himself says that from the objective view we can see that we ought not let our objective concerns muscle aside our subjective concerns: "at some threshold, hard to define, we will conclude that it is unreasonable to expect people in

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general to sacrifice themselves and those to whom they have close personal ties to the general good." *The View from Nowhere*, p. 202.

<sup>22</sup>Bernard Williams makes this false inference in his influential essay "Persons, Character and Morality" (in A. Rorty, ed., *The Identities of Persons* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976], pp. 197-217).

<sup>23</sup>"The Absurd," p. 157.

<sup>24</sup>I give a fuller account in "Arbitrary Reasons," Roth and Ross, eds., *Doubting: Contemporary Essays on Skepticism* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990).

<sup>25</sup>"The Absurd," p. 155.

<sup>26</sup>"The Absurd", p. 153.

<sup>27</sup>For additional reasons to question Nagel's analysis of absurdity, see I. J. H. Williams, "Scepticism and the Absurd," *Philosophical Investigations* 9 (1986) 308-314.

<sup>28</sup>For a useful description of such people, see Oliver Sachs, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

<sup>29</sup>For further discussion of the skeptic's commitments, see my essay "Arbitrary Reasons," op. cit.

<sup>30</sup>Some final complaints about Nagel's essay: he says our absurdity lies "not in the fact that. . .an external view [from which all the contingency and specificity of our aims and pursuits become clear] can be taken of us, but in the fact that we ourselves can take it, without ceasing to be the persons whose ultimate concerns are so coolly regarded."

Earlier Nagel told us that creatures capable of skepticism can see that there is no reason to be serious, yet they cannot help but be, so that there is a discrepancy between pretension and reality. Now Nagel wants to add that the *existence* of this discrepancy is not enough to make us absurd. We are absurd only if we *see* the discrepancy. But why on earth not call the discrepancy *itself* absurdity? Why would what we see *sub specie aeternitatis*



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strike us as absurd unless what we were seeing was our absurdity? The situation of a Sisyphus who never takes the time to see the futility of his rock-pushing is still absurd.

Nagel's strong emphasis on discrepancies between pretension and reality also make it difficult to see why he thinks an 'external' or 'objective' view is an essential ingredient in absurdity. For discrepancies far more straightforwardly occur *within* our 'internal' and 'subjective' concerns; for example, the absurdity of Sisyphus is clearly explained without any reference to Nagel's objective view: Sisyphus's single project is to get a rock up a hill, but he cannot.

Other types of absurdity, too, are best explained without any reference beyond people's perspectives. Questions such as whether an action has a point, whether it makes sense, and whether it is incongruous will receive different answers depending on whose perspective we consult. Absurdity is perspectival and contextual: whether a situation is absurd for *me* depends on my values and context. *Your* situation, or that of aliens, or of any creature with expectations, might be absurd from my point of view yet not from yours or theirs. Thus it is reasonable to say that what is important to me is whether my situation is absurd in *my* context and given *my* point of view. Still, it remains important even if I do not *notice* that my situation is absurd from my point of view. Again, if Sisyphus always thought that eventually he was going to get that rock up there whereupon the gods would release him, he would never consider his efforts futile, even if in reality they were.

<sup>31A</sup>nother strategy for making life more worthwhile is to avoid what might be called the particularist fallacy: do not assume that a life plan cannot be worthwhile if it consists of activities each of which would prove unworthwhile if the whole of life were devoted to it. Limited projects can find their places in more inclusive endeavors, and there is no reason why the process of building our affairs into more extensive schemes could not continue until a full life emerged. Indeed, in principle the building could continue until it resulted

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in plans that extend indefinitely--were it not for death, whether our own or that of those about whom we care.